



Branding Strategies and Ecologes Architecture to Develop Wellness Tourism in Egypt

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Abstract.

Wellness has become the holistic approach that raises a community's quality of life. Wellness tourism is a form of therapy based on natural resources; it is used to treat patients as well as tourists who want to blend into the natural environment. Therefore, wellness tourism needs preservation through adapting sustainable approaches. Eco lodges, which are examples of sustainable architecture, can act as a protection tool for wellness destinations. Their signature architecture and unique built environment could promote wellness tourism. The promotion and development of wellness destinations could be supported by branding as an important marketing strategy. This research aims to present a matrix that can integrate the architectural elements of eco lodges and branding strategy elements. A comparative methodology is used to analyze branding strategies' theories, models, and frameworks to propose the effective branding elements that could develop wellness eco lodges. Egypt is one of the countries that is endowed with a wide variety of natural resources and is a well-known nation for its ecotourism activities such as wellness activities. One of the most significant and underappreciated wellness destinations is Wadi El Natroun. It has distinguished by its salty lakes like El Hamra Lake, which has healing characteristics besides its religious significance and unique architectural character. Therefore, a branding strategy is proposed to develop and promote Wadi Natroun's wellness abilities through eco lodge architectural elements.

Keywords: Eco lodges' Architecture, Wellness Tourism, Branding Strategies, Wadi El Natroun.

1. Introduction

Wellness tourism provides vacations based on integrating with natural resources. It is one of the fastest growing sectors; it raises a community's quality of life in all aspects, especially the destination's economy. Aside from the pandemic consciousness to wellness economy and travel restrictions, researchers predicted that travelers would be more aware of the benefits of wellness tourism. Therefore, there will be more demand for natural and sustainable facilities that could be provided in wellness tourism. [1] As such, the world's wellness economy is predicted to reach \$7.0 trillion in 2025, after a period of strong market growth from \$4.3 trillion in 2017 to \$4.9 trillion in 2019 [2]

Many studies proved that sustainability is a key idea in the development and planning of wellness tourism. [3] Eco lodges, as one of the very important applications for sustainability and responsible travel, their architecture is the medium that could promote a destination's potential and regional identity. [4] Branding eco lodges can strengthen the wellness industry's physical assets since architectural landmarks may influence travelers' perceptions of a particular location. Branding can highlight the architectural elements of eco lodges and use them in the development and promotion process for wellness destinations. [5, p. 23]

Egypt has a rich range of wellness resources, which help in healing practices and maintain wellbeing. Wadi Natroun has many wellness potentials because of its favorable climate and year-round sunny days; a salty lake with a mineral spring in the center; and therapeutic plants. All of these resources has healing features that can treat many diseases, such as, skin, rheumatic, stomach diseases and many other problems. [6]

In order to promote Wadi Natroun as a wellness destination, this study suggests a branding matrix that integrate elements of branding strategy with eco lodge architecture. Moreover, emphasizing the significance of eco lodges as an architectural context that preserve wellness potential and highlight the region's distinctiveness to tourists.

1.1. Research Problem

The following research problems has been identified:

- The need for sustainable approaches such as eco lodges architectural context for developing, promoting, and protecting wellness resources.
- The need for highlighting and promoting Wadi El Natroun identity through the architectural elements of El Hamra Eco lodge, to presenting it as a branding image for wellness tourism.
- Wadi Natroun combines several wellness dimensions, including spiritual, mental, and physical wellness, So El Hamra Eco lodge needs to be recognized as a holistic wellness destination and take advantage of the destination's therapeutic abilities and religious significance, and the surrounded wildlife, like bird watching and rare plants.

1.2. Research Aims

This research aims to provide a branding matrix that integrates the architectural elements of eco lodges and branding strategy elements to promote wellness tourism in Wadi El Natroun. In order to influence travelers' perception towards eco lodges and use their iconic architecture as a brand image for wellness destinations.

1.3. Research Hypothesis

- The integration between branding strategies elements and wellness destination pillars can provide a branding matrix that could evaluate the architectural elements of eco lodges to presents a sustainable, satisfying, and competitive wellness destination.
- The architectural elements of eco lodges can be a brand image for sustainable wellness destinations.
- The proposed branding matrix can be a guide for evaluating and developing the architectural elements of El Hamra eco lodge, to brand Wadi El Natroun as a holistic wellness destination.

1.4. Research Methodology

The research adapted an inductive approach to analyses branding strategies, frameworks, and models in order to derive effective branding elements. Moreover, evaluation criteria will be conducted from the proposed branding matrix to evaluate the architectural elements of El Hamra Eco lodge in Wadi El Natroun. So architecture recommendations will be concluded to develop and promote the eco lodge as wellness destination.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Wellness Tourism

Wellness tourism is a holistic approach that combines two key concepts; preserving wellness environment and providing a healing atmosphere for travelers. Wellness tourism is not limited to patients but also to travelers who seek to integrate with nature through different practices. [7] According to [8] report, Wellness Tourism is defined as “travelling to a place outside the normal environment in order to participate in activities which maintain or enhance their health and well-being, integrate with nature, or provide authentic or location-based experiences or therapies that are not available at home.” Although Camille Hoheb, who founded Wellness Tourism Worldwide, has defined it as “purpose-driven travel encompassing discovery, connectivity, fulfillment, and transformation through positive engagement with people, cultures, and nature” [7]

Researches has proven that there are differences between medical tourism and wellness tourism, as clarified in figure (1). However, this research concentrates on wellness

tourism with all of its architectural context, facilities, and services. In order to create a sustainable and competitive destination.

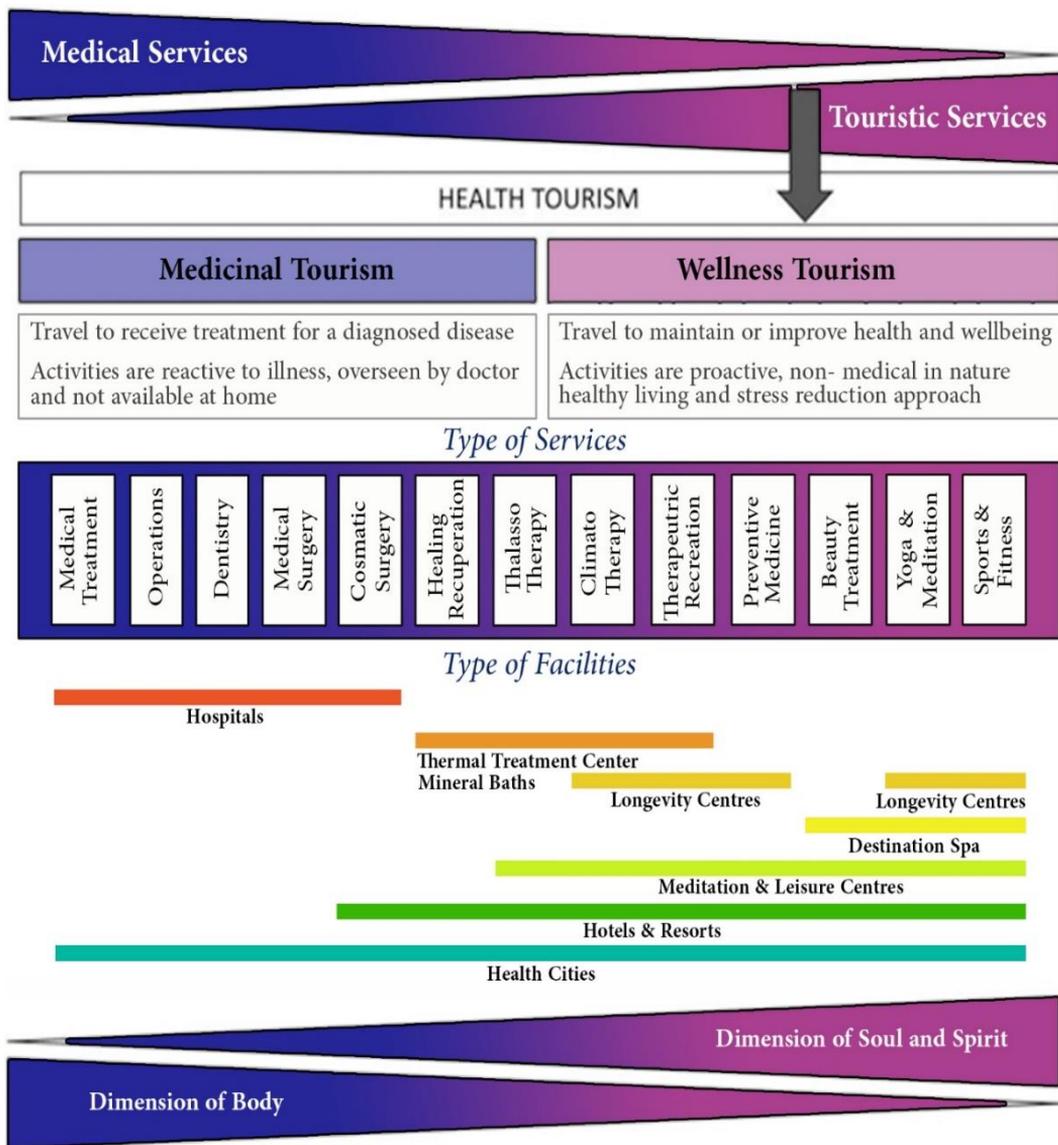


Figure 1 The Difference between Medical Tourism and Wellness Tourism, By the Researcher based on [9]

2.2. Wellness Tourism Destinations

Destinations as the provider of the holistic wellness experience, are defined as “an area chosen by customers (with either preventive or curative motives) as a travel destination to improve their state of health and/ or well-being; the destination includes necessary infrastructure and services such as accommodation, restaurants, and other facilities, with a systematically developed offer for health and well-being”. [10, p. 22] According to Buhalis in 2003, touristic destinations are a complex of integrated products and services. A six main aspects were provided to represent a successful tourism destination, which are: [11]

- *Accommodation*: It is the residential area for wellness visitors, with rates ranging on different scales according to the period of stay. such as resorts, hotels, eco lodges, etc.
- *Accessibility*: It represents mobility to or inside the desired destination. such as routes, terminals, public transportation, airports, bridges, railways, etc.
- *Attractions*: the primary and the motivation factor for visiting a wellness destination such as hot springs, mineral water, remedial sand, artificial spas, meditation facilities, wellness historical sites,
- *Amenities*: It represents integrative tourism services in the area. such as nutrition restaurants, aromatic restaurants, and beauty care places.
- *Assemblage*: It represents the recreational activities created by the tourism agencies. It is the integration of wellness tourism with other types of tourism.
- *Ancillary Services*: Any additional services that are geared toward residents but that tourists may use during their visit. such as banks, offices, religious buildings, etc.

Accordingly, those aspects form the architectural context of wellness destinations, which is the major motivator for a tourist's travel decision. Therefore, the attractiveness of the destination is measured by the quality of the architectural elements provided. Accommodation, as one of the main aspects of any tourism destination, may include or support multiple destination aspects. Wellness-related attractions may frequently be found inside or next to accommodation venues. Consequently, there is a direct relationship between a destination's 6As and the eco lodges architectural context. [10]

2.3. The Architecture Context of Wellness Eco lodges

Eco lodges are a sustainable type of accommodation in relation to tourism planning and development. They bring positive changes and reduce negative impact, in addition to sustainable economic growth, social inclusiveness, employment, environmental protection, enhancing cultural values, and diversity. [12] In 1994, at the first "International Eco Lodge Forum and Field Seminar," introduces the phrase "Eco lodge" for the first time. During the

conference, the discussions produce a sourcebook dedicated to “The Eco lodge’s Planners and Developers”. [13]

Eco lodges are defined as “a facility that merges with its settings, offering guests an environmental understanding of the natural and cultural context around them”. [14] Therefore, Wellness Eco lodges are defined as “architectural context integrated with the surrounding environment, for traveler who seek wellness experiences, taking into consideration preserving and protecting wellness resources.”

This study suggests wellness eco lodges as a form of accommodation that emphasizes the local environment. Given that not all of the destination pillars in the eco lodge's architectural environment are equally significant, figure (2) demonstrates the functional relationship between wellness destination pillars and architectural elements of eco lodges. It is divided into three categories, which are Primary elements, Secondary elements, and Additional elements.

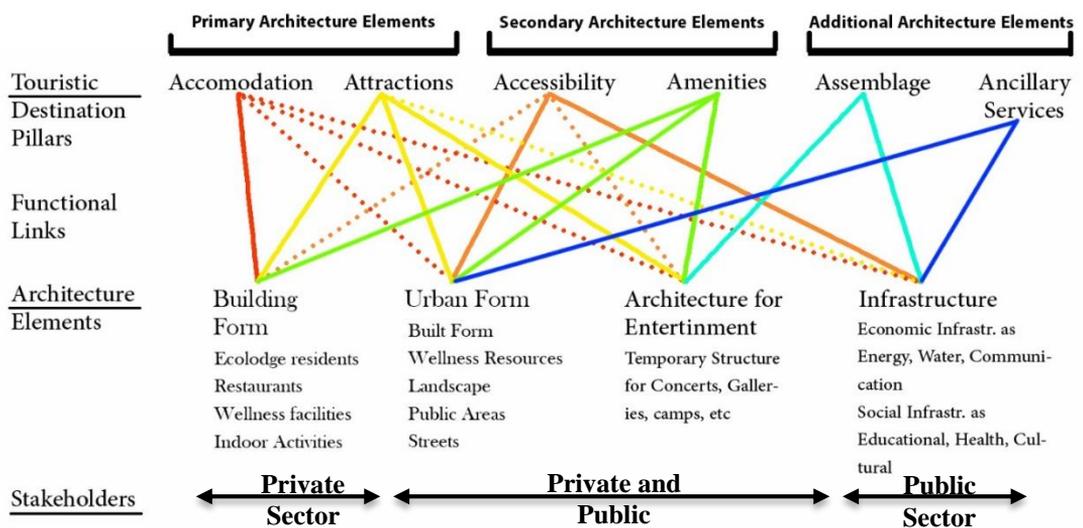


Figure 2 Eco lodge Architecture Context for Wellness Tourism Destination, By the Researcher

2.4. Branding Eco lodges as a Wellness Destination

Eco lodge sector has become very competitive due to globalization and rapid changes in technology, travelers' preferences, and market conditions. A unique destination must use all its aspects for tourism appeal. Eco lodges as a unique architectural element are used to brand the image of wellness destinations. Both branding and wellness eco lodges are modern approaches to construct destination's identity and personality. [15]



Figure 3 Adrere Amellal Eco lodge in Siwa, Egypt, <https://www.archilovers.com/projects/188838/adrere-amellal-ecolodge.html>

As such, Branding Wellness Eco lodges is defined as “the process of promoting a nature- based facility that is allocated in a wellness tourism destination to offer travelers a unique experience that reflect the image of local culture, without harming wellness natural resources”

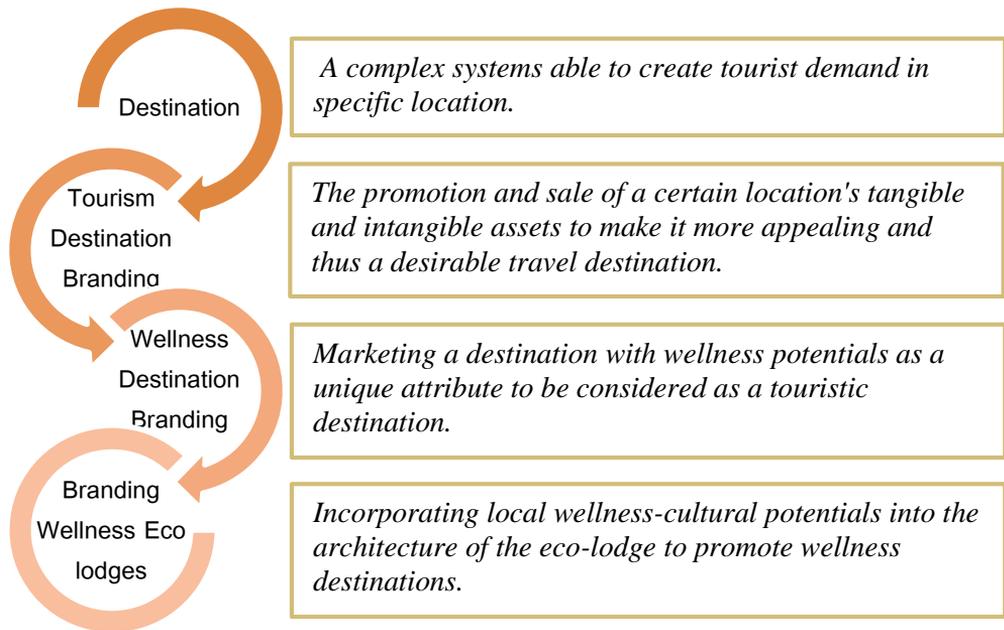


Figure 4 The relation between Branding Destination and Branding Wellness Eco lodges, By the Researcher

3. Proposed Elements for Branding Strategy

Branding Strategy is the brand's general big plan; "it is the long-term plan to achieve a series of short-term goals that ultimately result in the identification and preference of the brand by consumers." [16] Branding Strategy for Wellness Tourism is defined as "the strategic plan that transforms and analyze destination's identity and perceived image into a competitive wellness eco lodge with all its required services and products, which in turn transfers it to a competitive wellness tourism destination". [17]

Creating a destination brand is a very complicated process. It is about combining the current destination abilities and presenting them according to the visitor's needs. A successful branding strategy starts by identifying branding elements that could communicate the brand vision, image and fulfill its promises to the customers. [18]

Over the years, many models and frameworks were introduced for building a destination brand. This part analyses 33 theoretical and practical studies that are relevant to branding wellness destinations in the tourism industry, such as place brand and branding model, destination brand and branding framework, and strategic place brand model. As a result, Brand Image, Brand Attributes, and their functionality were the most used branding models and frameworks, followed by Brand Identity, Brand Equity, and Brand Experience. Table (1) clarifies the definitions of branding elements, in addition to the studies that have mentioned them, taking into consideration the percentage of recognition, which reflects their importance in constructing branding strategies.

Table 1 Existing Theories for Tourism Destination Branding, Source: Adapted from [19] [17] [20] [21]

Branding Elements	Description	Scholars/ Researchers	Total Recognition
Brand Image	It is the consumers' opinion about a brand due to its cognitive and affective connections held in consumer perception. [22] It affects tourists' travel decisions towards a specific destination, whether they like it or hate it. [23]	(Clarke, 2000) (Keller,2001) (Cai,2002) (Echtner& Ritchie, 2003) (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) (Dwyer &Kim, 2003) (Rainisto, 2003) (Kavaratzis, 2004) (Iiiachenko, 2005) (Trueman & Cornelius, 2006) (Anholt, 2007) (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007) (Govers& Go, 2009) (Mak,2011) (Upadhyaya, 2012) (Garcia et al., 2012)	Mentioned in 48% of the total researcher
Brand Attributes	They are the core value and the unique characteristics of the destination. It's the base of the destinations attractiveness, such as the wellness places, historical and cultural archaeological sites, infrastructure, and accessibility.	(Cai,2002) (Echtner& Ritchie, 2003) (Dwyer &Kim, 2003) (Kavaratzis, 2004) (Morgan & Pritchard 2004) (Iiiachenko, 2005) (Anholt, 2007) (Mazanec et al., 2007) (Gaggiotti et al., 2008) (Moilanen, 2008) (Govers& Go, 2009) (Balakrishnan, 2009) (Upadhyaya, 2012) (Campelo et al. , 2013) (Kladou & Kehagias, 2014) (Alves & Campon, 2019)	Mentioned in 51% of the total researcher
Brand Functionality	All the services and privileges the brands offer must be functional and of competitive quality. The brand must meet visitors' needs and continually work to exceed their expectations.	(Clarke, 2000) (Keller,2001) (Echtner& Ritchie, 2003) (Dwyer &Kim, 2003) (Morgan & Pritchard 2004) (Trueman & Cornel., 2006) (Anholt, 2007) (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007) (Mazanec et al., 2007) (Moilanen, 2008) (Govers& Go, 2009) (Upadhyaya, 2012) (Kladou & Kehagias, 2014) (Alves & Campon, 2019)	Mentioned in 42% of the total researcher
Brand Identity	It is the destination's advantages that position itself among competitors. An effective brand identity promotes the destination's character and value proposition and delivers emotional strength, not just a mental image. [24]	(Keller,2001) (Kaplanidou2003) (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) (Rainisto, 2003) (Trueman & Cornel., 2006) (Anholt, 2007) (Gaggiotti et al., 2008) (Moilanen, 2008) (Govers& Go, 2009) (Hanna& Rowley, 2011) (Wheeler, 2011) (Campelo et al. , 2013)	Mentioned in 39% of the total researcher

Brand Equity	The concept of destination brand equity is reflected in travels' intentions to revisit or recommend the destination to others. [25]	(Keller,2001) (Cai,2002) (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007) (Hsu &Cai, 2009) (Govers& Go, 2009) (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011) (Hanna& Rowley, 2011) (Choi & Cai, 2012) (Kladou & Kehagias, 2014) (Alves & Campon, 2019)	Mentioned in 30% of the total researcher
Brand Experience	Brand experience is the sensation a customer has when interacting or engaging with a destination. It varies from person to person according to their expectations, needs, and desires.	(Echtner& Ritchie, 2003) (Morgan & Pritchard 2004) (Trueman & Cornel., 2006) (Anholt, 2007) (Hankinson, 2007) (Moilanen, 2008) (Hsu &Cai, 2009) (Govers& Go, 2009) (Hanna& Rowley, 2011) (Choi & Cai, 2012) (Campelo et al. , 2013)	Mentioned in 30% of the total researcher

As a result, from the comparative content study, it reveals a connection between eco lodges' architectural context and branding strategy elements, as seen in figure (5). This connection enables wellness destinations to remain sustainable through brand attributes and functionality, competitive through brand identity and the provided brand experience and satisfying to their tourist through brand image and brand equity.

In order to develop a wellness destination, the evaluation criteria in table (2) were adapted from the branding matrix in figure (5), which evaluates the architectural components of eco lodges and measures their ability to present and promote the branding elements of their destination. The study makes use of a numerical assessment, taking into account the proportion of recognition for the branding characteristics listed in Table (2).

Table 2 The Adapted Evaluation Model, by the Researcher

Goal	Criteria	Score	
Destination Sustainability	Brand Attributes	25%	45%
	Functionality	20%	
Visitors Satisfaction	Brand Image	20%	30%
	Brand Equity	10%	
Destination Competitiveness	Brand Identity	15%	25%
	Brand Experience	10%	

4. The Case Study of Wadi El Natroun

4.1. General Background

Wadi El Natroun is located in Behira government in the northern east of the western desert in Egypt. It lies in the middle of the Cairo- Alexandria road, which is 60 Km from Cairo. Wadi Natroun or “the valley of salt”, as it so called in ancient Egyptian times, because the region contains large alkaline lakes that accumulate natron-rich salt deposits, which were required for the mummification process. [26] Nevertheless, the Romans extracted silica to use in making glass. Hamra Lake is a healing destination in addition to being a necessary draw for Christians. A mineral spring that was in the centre of the saline lake burst when Mary, Jesus' mother, came by. [6] Thousands more churches have since been built in Wadi el Natroun, but only four of them are still standing today: Anba Bishoy, Baramus, Abu Makar, and El-Suryan. [26]

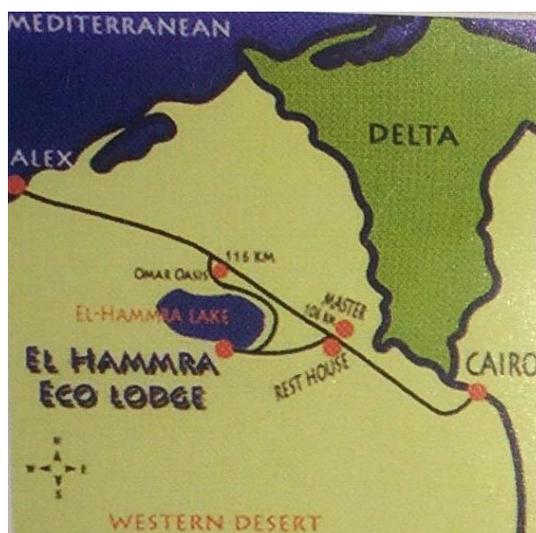


Figure 6 Eco lodge el Hamra Location, [6]

4.2. Wellness Potentials

El Hamra Lake is one of the eight biggest lakes in the region, with an area of 1.2 km². It's characterised by its salty water and red color, and in the middle there is a mineral healing spring that helps in healing skin disease, rheumatism, and stomach diseases. The weather in the region is suitable for healing practices, as it has an average temperature of 30 °C in August and 15 °C in January. However, it rains a lot in the area, where it reaches 20 mm all year. [6]



Figure 7 The Sequence of Wadi Natroun Lakes, From Google Earth by the Researcher

4.3. Evaluating El Hamra Eco lodge using Branding Matrix

Table 3 Evaluating El Hamra Eco lodge Architecture Sustainability, By the Researcher

Goal	Criteria	Architecture Application	Score
Destination Sustainability	Brand Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attractions Even though the area is well recognized for its monasteries, few people are aware of its healing capabilities. Considering how badly and polluted the lake is. The area cannot accommodate tourists because there are no hotels or other lodging options except El Hamra Eco Lodge. 	20 %
		<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;">   </div> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>El Hamra Lake, By the Researcher</i> <i>El Suryan Monastery, [26]</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Figure 8 Wadi El Natroun Attractions</i></p>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accessibility The roads leading to El Hamra Eco Lodge are unpaved and far off the main road, considering that there is just one sign on the main road guiding visitors to the eco lodge. Additionally, another sub-road separates the eco lodge from the lake. Besides, there are no access routes connecting the lake to other tourist attractions. 	

Table 4 Evaluating El Hamra Eco lodge Visitors' Satisfaction, By the Researcher

Goal	Criteria	Architecture Application	Score
Visitors Satisfaction	Brand Image	<p>The eco lodge is reflecting the destination's architecture style, which is inspired by the regional historical monasteries. In addition to using local materials in construction. However, it is not iconic or in harmony with the surroundings. Moreover, it lacks any energy solutions or technological trends. Visitors are partially aware of all the wellness facilities the lodge can offer. It does not have international appeal.</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;">   </div> <p><i>Figure 10 The Main Building "Reception and Main Entrance", By the Researcher</i></p>	10 %
	Brand Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - According to the lodge's statistics, the number of tourists are steady in 2021 and 2022, which is not enough for the lodge. - From the visitors' reviews on the travel applications, 78% of the people are using the place as a day trip, but not for a long trip. Which is not suitable for wellness practices and the healing period, as the wellness process needs an average stay of 8-15 days to be efficient. Moreover, the place is suffering from low maintenance and high pollution. 	5%
The Total Score for Visitor Satisfaction is 15/30			

Table 5 Evaluating El Hamra Eco lodge Architecture Competitiveness, by the Researcher

Goal	Criteria	Architecture Application	Score
Destination Competitiveness	Brand Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The lodge is themed with different colors that are not in harmony with the destination's identity. Which ensures the separation between the eco lodge and the history of the place. - The Domes are reflecting the architecture of the monasteries. - In spite of having local employees, there are no special local experience. - They present ordinary Egyptian food no specialties or nutrition plans. 	5%
	Brand Experience	The whole wellness experience is not exceptional; however, the destination has an exceptional wellness resources and environment. There is no integration between the other destination's touristic potentials and the lodge. The level of hospitality is ordinary. There is no medical consultation in the place to get the maximum benefit from the wellness practices.	3%
The Total Score for Destination Competitiveness is 7/25			
Case study score is 50%			

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

El Hamra Lake is an intermediate sustainable destination with a score of 28/45, or 62%; it has distinctive wellness resources and acceptable facilities. As a destination, it did not fare well in the competition. It received a 7/25, or 28%, rating. Furthermore, it scored 15/30, or 50%, which indicated that it was neutral in terms of meeting tourists' needs. Therefore, cooperation amongst stakeholders is necessary. Beginning with protecting El Hamra Lake from infringements and ensuring that it has the proper infrastructure to display a touristic image. Following that, the eco lodge owner must consider visitors' needs and provide them with an exceptional experience while utilizing all the special resources the location has to offer. The architecture of El Hamra eco lodge should reflect place identity, so it could provide a competitive brand image and equity.

Wadi El Natroun is an exceptional place that could be an international tourist destination. If only its resources were used efficiently with promotion strategies. The proposed branding matrix can achieve this equation by developing the architectural elements of eco lodges in a way that can brand the destination as a wellness destination. Through

developing the architecture of the eco lodge to act as a place image that could reflect the religious and wellness identity. In addition, create a connection between El Hamra Lake and the eco lodge through design elements, amenities, and assemblage. Besides highlighting, the eco lodge location through increasing signage system and develop the main roads of the eco lodge. The eco lodge could provide its visitors an exceptional experience by involving local people and place culture and identity in the design and hospitality process, which in its turn will promote and brand the ecolodge. Moreover, the suggested brand model can act as a development method for eco lodges in wellness destinations. As it will help El Hamra eco lodges to appeal as an international wellness tourism destination that integrate between religious tourism and wellness tourism.

In order to ensure destination improvement, sustainability, and marketing, this research suggests a development approach for wellness tourism that utilize the architectural assets of the destination. Moreover, architectural features mostly form visitors' perceptions of a destination, and these perceptions influence their intents to recommend and revisit. Therefore, it's very important to support wellness tourism in Egypt. It supports distinctive wellness resources, which could be an important promotional element that influences the country's global reputation and the wellness industry.

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